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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000216

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN APPROVE ELIMINATION OF TERM LIMITS,
CHAVEZ CONFIRMS HE WILL RUN AGAIN IN 2012

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The National Electoral Council (CNE) announced February 15 that Venezuelan voters approved a proposed constitutional amendment to eliminate term limits, 54.85 percent to 45.15 percent. The result, coming on the heels of the "Yes" camp's state-funded and sometimes violent campaign split along socio-economic lines and is likely to accentuate political polarization. Nevertheless, voting was generally peaceful and fluid with only scattered irregularities. In his nationally televised victory speech, Chavez confirmed that he is already a "pre-candidate" for the 2012 presidential election. Opposition leaders quickly recognized the "Yes" camp's victory, while underscoring that they polled their highest gross vote total since Chavez was first elected president in 1998. The opposition's future success, however, depends on reaching into Chavez's base. President Chavez told the media February 14 and 15 that he is ready to "start down a path of normalizing relations with the United States based on mutual respect." Embassy recommends that USG officials reiterate our interest in constructive relations with the GBRV while encouraging the GBRV to avail itself of existing diplomatic channels. End Summary.

"Yes" Vote Wins By Over a Million

¶2. (SBU) CNE President Tibisay Lucena announced at 9:25 p.m. local time on February 15 that, based on 94.25 percent of polling booths reporting, Venezuelan voters approved the elimination of term limits for all elected offices by a vote of 6,003,594 to 5,040,082, or 54.36 percent to 45.63 percent.

A second announcement, with 99.5 percent of the votes counted, put the vote at 6.3 million YES (54.85 percent) and 5.2 million NO (45.15 percent). The CNE announced that 11,242,817 registered voters participated, constituting an abstention rate of 32.95%. According to CNE statistics, the "No" vote won in only five of 23 states (and lost in Caracas - when Caracas is defined as only the PSUV held Libertador borough). There appears to have been little cross-over voting with "Yes" votes dominating traditional pro-Chavez neighborhoods and "No" votes carrying opposition strongholds.

While the opposition's efforts to get-out-the vote, especially those of the students, were instrumental in obtaining their highest vote tally ever, the lack of an attractive political message aimed at winning Chavez' much larger base proved the fatal flaw.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy deployed nine teams of two to visit polling

stations around Caracas and in six states. Embassy's informal observers visited some 90 voting centers and were invited to enter 71. Embassy teams and the Canadian Embassy's informal observers confirmed that voting was generally fluid and peaceful and did not see any indication of large-scale irregularities. Some voters from both the "Yes" and "No" camps reported a technical glitch by which confirming votes too quickly led to nullified votes. Two prominent leaders from Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) reported receiving null votes. One of them was televised "re-voting," an electoral violation. CNE reported that there were 199,041 null votes overall. Embassy observers also saw scattered campaigning around polling stations by both sides, although more frequently by pro-government supporters. Campaigning is prohibited 48 hours before polling begins.

Chavez Is Pre-Candidate for 2012

¶4. (SBU) Immediately following the CNE's announcement of the "Yes" victory, a jubilant President Chavez appeared before a large crowd outside the "Balcony of the Revolution" in the Miraflores Presidential Palace to thank his supporters. From there, Chavez delivered a one-hour victory speech "en cadena" (required broadcast of all local television and radio networks). The Venezuelan president confirmed that "unless the people stipulate something else, this soldier is a pre-candidate for 2013." Venezuela's next presidential election is slated for late 2012, and the winner will be sworn in early 2013. He called the "Yes" win a victory for all Venezuelans, including those who voted "No." Chavez also pledged to address ongoing problems in Venezuela, including corruption, crime, bureaucracy, and inefficiency.

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¶5. (C) Chavez remains by far Venezuela's most popular political figure and right now faces no real internal opposition to running for a third six-year term in 2012. Among the fractious opposition, there are numerous leaders already trying to position themselves to be the consensus opposition candidate, but none so far even approaches the levels of public support that the Venezuelan president currently enjoys. It was university students, and not opposition political party leaders, who were at the forefront of the "No" campaign. As one opposition-oriented analyst writes, "the opposition remains fragmented, and no single figure of real importance has yet emerged to confront Chavez on an equal basis, and no coherent message and attractive vision of the future have been produced to compete against Chavez's undefined 'Socialism of the 21st Century'."

Opposition Accepts Defeat

¶6. (SBU) Key opposition leaders recognized the "Yes" victory in a joint press conference after the CNE released its results. Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) President Omar Barboza expressed satisfaction that the opposition had polled over five million votes for the first time and said opposition parties would continue to struggle against Chavez's "totalitarian project." Ismael Garcia, Secretary General of the former pro-Chavez party Podemos, admonished the Venezuelan president to "administer his victory well." University student leader David Smolansky also publicly accepted the results, while at the same time denouncing the Venezuelan government's "abuse of power" during the short referendum campaign. Opposition parties can next compete against Chavez's PSUV in municipal council elections in the second half of 2009 and National Assembly elections in late ¶2010.

¶7. (SBU) In the run-up to the CNE's announcement of results,

both the "Yes" and "No" camps expressed confidence that their side would win. While Venezuela's election rules prohibit the publication of election projections prior to the CNE, the "Yes" camp circulated exit polls to suggest the "No" camp was leading. "No" campaign director Jorge Rodriguez held an 8:10 p.m. press conference and stated that he was awaiting the official results with "a smile on my lips" and suggested that Chavez's followers "meet in the usual place" (for a victory celebration outside the Miraflores Presidential Palace). Opposition politicians quickly denounced Rodriguez's thinly-veiled projection and hastened to urge opposition poll monitors not to abandon any ongoing voting audits at voting centers.

Ready to Talk to USG

18. (C) During a February 14 press conference with international reports and his February 15 press stand-up after voting, President Chavez stated his interest in "normalizing" relations with the USG. President Chavez has repeatedly suggested in recent years that he is open to "dialogue" with the United States, but neither he nor his senior diplomats have followed up. GBRV officials continue to suggest that the way forward needs to be a "top down" process between Chavez and the President, without revealing what substance, if any, they expect to cover beyond a politically convenient photo opportunity. Embassy recommends that the USG publicly and privately encourage the GBRV to use existing diplomatic channels to explore the potential for a more constructive bilateral relationship.

Comment

19. (C) President Chavez's referendum victory eliminating term limits is a testament to his charisma, political skills, perseverance, flexibility, and resource advantage. He now has what he failed to achieve in 2007, a clear path to running for a third six-year term in 2012 with no clear, viable opponent on the horizon. His PSUV machine also grew stronger, gaining a little less than a million votes over November 2008. At the same time, it is a significant blow to the democratic opposition, which had been buoyed by a victory in the 2007 constitutional referendum and a strong showing in

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the 2008 state and local elections. It is also an indictment of opposition political parties, who unlike university and civil society activists, rallied behind the "No" campaign late and contributed little. The results also clearly indicate a wide political divide along class lines, with almost universal support for the opposition in the middle and upper classes, and equally strong support for Chavez among the larger lower socio-economic classes.

110. (C) Nevertheless, President Chavez is a much better campaigner than administrator. With serious economic problems looming, he is going to face considerable political challenges sustaining his popularity with fewer carrots to offer. The emboldened Venezuelan president is likely to resort to using more sticks against his slowly growing, albeit often inept, opposition. The GBRV's recent decisions to deter former Polish President Lech Valesa from visiting and its quick February 13 expulsion of a visiting Spanish member of the European parliament (Septel) may well portend GBRV conduct to come. Opposition parties, for their part, may have maximized the participation of their existing base. To pose a real challenge to Chavez over the next four years, they will need to make more genuine, skillful, and concerted efforts to attract support from Chavez's base among Venezuela's poor.

CAULFIELD